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MULTIPLE VOICES IN *THE DEATH OF BERNADETTE LEFTHAND*

Even without Tony Hillerman's praise above the title of the Bantam edition of Ron Querry's *The Death of Bernadette Lefthand* (New York: Bantam, 1995; first published 1993), comparisons with Hillerman's mystery novels are inevitable. Both construct plots about murderers and victims; both draw upon the local color of the Four Corners area of New Mexico and Arizona; both deal with Indian[1] characters and draw upon Navajo customs and beliefs; both implicitly acknowledge that they not part of the culture they describe.

The similarities may account for Antonya Nelson's dissatisfaction with Querry's book in her *New York Times* review. She complained that the two first person narrators "cannot sustain suspense in the mystery because they do not have sufficient information to present to the reader. Much of what they report is either digressive or ancillary." When the element of witchcraft appears, however, the reader "feels the growing threat to Bernadette's life" and "The book begins to feel like a mystery...." This leads Nelson to predict that Querry will "find the perfect balance between the evocative Southwest and the equally evocative mystery genre" (Nelson 31).

Her description of the book, if not her judgment, is more or less supportable. Bernadette Lefthand has been killed—not, as her friends, family, and even the ostensible murderer think, by Anderson George, her handsome, alcoholic Navajo husband but by Emmett Take Horse, physically and spiritually deformed, who turns first to witchcraft, then

[1] I use "Indian" in preference to "Native American," following the usage of my First American colleagues.

to encouraging Anderson's drinking, and finally to physical violence out of jealousy and desire for Bernadette. He plants the evidence that leads to Anderson's arrest and, when confronted with photographic evidence of the crime he supposedly committed while drunk, his suicide.

And Nelson's logic is formally impeccable: *Bernadette Lefthand* falls in the mystery genre; it doesn't have the proper elements of the mystery genre; therefore it is not quite successful. The reasoning is not fallacious; the problem lies in the major premise. Querry has used elements of the mystery novel, but he has used far more ambitious formal means in order to create a complex picture of life in the modern Southwest.

The difference between Querry and Hillerman is obvious if one looks past the superficial similarities. Despite the exotic setting, Hillerman's books are classic examples of the mystery genre, detective novels in every sense of the word. He uses the standard limited third person point of view, with the investigator as focus of narration and major center of interest. And his books are constructed in the traditional way: disruption of social balance by a crime; search for a solution (dependent on evidence about motive, method, and opportunity); discovery of the guilty party; and restoration, however tentative and uneasy, of order in the society and in the mind of the detective, who has to understand the motive as well as the method and opportunity. Hillerman's Navajo detectives, educated in white universities, are useful not just to solve crimes but to present to the reader a world-view which they both share and analyze and a setting to whose beauty they are acutely sensitive.

Bernadette Lefthand turns the traditional mystery form inside out. It has no detective, no investigation, no discovery, except by the reader, and, most important, no restoration of order, social or psychological. The reader is given motive and opportunity, but the method (actually two quite different methods), is not finally decidable. Unlike Hillerman, Querry employs not one consciousness but five different narrative voices which deny coherence to the plot and harmony to the world created in the novel.

The narrative voices interweave with, supplement, and sometimes contradict each other, but in general terms they range from wholly

uninvolved and objective, even scientific, to very limited and subjective. The first kind of voice—quotations from anthropologists about Navajo beliefs at the beginning and end of the novel and between sections—is not usually thought of as part of the narrative at all. In most novels, these would be called epigraphs, casually noted for their relevance and then safely ignored, but Querry clearly regards them as crucial to his purpose. In *Bernadette Lefthand* the epigraphs offer a more detached and analytical perspective than the other narrative voices. In the novel as a whole, Querry neither asserts nor denies the efficacy of witchcraft, but the epigraphs give scientific and analytic evidence of the widespread credence placed in it by Navajos. They also help to establish the methods by which Emmett Take Horse believes he is operating. The last quotation suggests but does not enforce belief in the means of retribution for his crime: "a witch who escapes human retribution will eventually be struck down by lightning" (215).

In what would be considered normal narrative space, Querry creates a voice in italicized passages.[2] The copywriter for Bantam calls this "an unnamed stranger." In fact, the voice is that of an impersonal narrator who employs limited omniscience to present the traditional Navajo cosmological view of the action. Most of the italicized material describes Emmett practicing witchcraft, but Querry also uses it to describe the Devil Chasing Ceremony with which Anderson's grandfather attempts to cure him, Anderson's brother Tom's horror at the sight of a skinwalker which causes his fatal crash, and Bernadette's ebbing consciousness and inert body. Most of these passages present specific behavior to reinforce and be reinforced by anthropological theory. To take a relatively minor example, in one italicized scene we learn that Emmett's father, also a witch was struck by lightning, and in his last appearance Emmett is driving into a rare thunderstorm, exulting in his success.

On two occasions, Querry uses a scenic mode of narration, once to describe Anderson and his brother Tom driving across the desert, once to present the police investigation of Tom's death in what seems to be a commonplace collision with a cow. These passages give a secular

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[2] Geary Hobson has noted that Frank Waters used this device in The Man Who Killed the Deer.

view of the causes of Tom's death and Anderson's decline. The first helps to establish the relationship between the brothers: Tom is steady and sober, Anderson's good angel to Emmett's bad; Anderson has a tendency to drink and show off. It also foreshadows Tom's death: Anderson tells Tom to stay alert for "any of those stray livestocks that might be xing each other out in the middle of this road," and Tom responds that "I expect you to keep me awake" (59). Just before the fatal crash, described in italics, Anderson is asleep. But as far as the white state trooper is concerned, in the ensuing scene in roman type, "it's just another one of your typical reservation one-vehicle accidents" (162), almost as common as deaths from alcoholism and suicide.

These objective voices are important to an understanding of what happens and why and how it does so, but the two first-person narrators dominate the novel. Their purpose is not, as Nelson thinks, to "sustain suspense in the mystery." As far as Gracie Lefthand, Bernadette's sister, and Starr Stubbs, Bernadette's white employer and friend, can tell, there is no mystery: she was murdered in a drunken rage by her husband, Anderson George, who then commits suicide. Nor can there be any suspense: Bernadette is already dead when the novel begins. Both accounts are retrospective. If Gracie and Starr were characters in a mystery novel, they would be witnesses, but Querry establishes them not as witnesses to but as survivors of a crime. In their struggle to understand what has happened, Gracie and Starr remember, speculate, and mourn. These narratives are central, not ancillary, to their tellers' function: to provide information about the character, setting, and situation from the contrasting viewpoints of a sixteen-year-old Taos-Apache girl and a sophisticated, somewhat jaded New York model transplanted after marriage to a country and western singer to Dulce, New Mexico.

Starr is so loosely connected with the plot that some readers think her character unnecessary or over-developed. Querry makes some attempt to integrate her into the story line: Gracie thinks for a time that she is somehow associated with the beginning of the troubles, and Starr does feel guilty about inviting Anderson in for a drink when he picks up Bernadette from work. But nothing comes of these suggestions, and Starr's real purpose in the novel is to represent a

white outsider's attitude towards Indian culture. Querry gives her individualizing traits (pills, drink, lovers, a crazy husband), partly in order to show that the white world is far from ideal, partly to make her seem more than a mere convenience.

But she is clearly useful. Bored and lonely in Dulce, which she finds stark and ugly, she collects Southwestern art, jewelry, and clothing. Curious about Indian life and culture, she has to gather information from reading because "Lord knows you couldn't get them to tell you anything about themselves" (31). She employs Bernadette as a maid, is drawn to her beauty of body and spirit, thinks of her as the only friend she has in Dulce, and regrets, far more than Bernadette or any of the Indians, the poverty in which she lives. Recognizing Bernadette's sadness as her husband's health and spirits decline, she offers to pay to send him to a "real doctor" because she has no faith in or understanding of Navajo healing ceremonies and regards belief in witches as mere superstition. In her last monologue, however, Starr is willing to admit that her inability to accept these ideas is "more a result of my own culture than of any unwillingness on my part to be open-minded" (183). Finally, speaking from feelings rather than superior white knowledge, she is both accurate and sympathetic: "Bernadette Lefthand is dead, and that something unspeakably evil and ugly happened to her" (183, 184). The major representative of the white world's impingement on the Indians, she is at the end far more sympathetic than the trooper who refers to Indians frozen from exposure as "popsicles" and thinks that, in contrast to "Your Mexicans and coloreds...Indians would rather kill themselves" (162) or than the white bigots from Lubbock in search of "some local Indian color" (39) who are lured into biting on a very old joke about how Indians get their names.

Starr is literally alienated from her surroundings, but Gracie Lefthand, whose account (except for the epigraphs) begins and ends the book, is so much at home that she hardly seems to judge. Perhaps not all of American literature comes, as Hemingway asserted, from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but Gracie certainly does. Like Huck, Gracie has little education, narrow experience, and an inherent shrewdness; like him, she does not think of herself as a victim; unlike him, she is not naive, nor does she admire or identify with the

dominant culture. And though she is aware of inter-tribal tensions and feelings of superiority, she does not share them.

Gracie is not exactly a traditional Indian. She watches game shows on a battered black-and-white television set, enjoys mass-produced junk food as much as she does a Hopi feast, and has only cursory knowledge of traditional Indian religion and none of the supposedly Indian identification with nature. She does note that "plastic bags have ruined the looks of the country" around Many Farms, but she also thinks the store from which they came "really nice" (82). White tourists endure heat and discomfort to enter Canyon de Chelly so they can "write their names everywhere and take souvenirs home with them even if they know they aren't supposed to" (83). For her, it is merely the place where Tom's and Anderson's grandparents live.

She does know that she is an Indian, and she is matter-of-fact about rather than resigned to her lot. She points out that except for the local white people, "most everybody who lives around here is an Indian and real poor. One just naturally goes with the other, I guess" (46). She knows that whites, including Starr, look down on and discriminate against Indians, but, aware of the foolishness of white "Wannabees" and even less knowledgeable tourists, she does not accept the premise that they are superior. Nor does she let white attitudes spoil her pleasure at staying in a Gallup motel and eating at a Furr's Cafeteria, the high points of her sixteen years' experience.

Gracie is aware of and resigned to personal as well as social limits. Plainer than her accomplished sister, she accepts her subordinate role, proud of Bernadette's beauty and her dancing and pleased with her romance with Anderson, the handsomest male in the region even though she does not entirely reject her Taos father's stereotyping of his Navajo tribe. She accepts the responsibility of caring for her sister's orphaned son (the idea of marriage and motherhood as natural disasters provides a subtext of her narrative) at the expense of her own education and prospects and even her home, planning at the end of the novel to move to California so that the boy will not grow up surrounded by people who know his parents' fate.

Gracie knows the circumstances of the characters' lives, but she does not have all the facts. She has heard that Emmett Take Horse is suspected of being a witch and believes in witches, though she doesn't

know much about them, and that the Navajo who caused his terrible injury in a riding accident wasted away and died, and she knows that her sister befriended Emmett and then took up with Anderson. But she cannot know the depth of Emmett's obsession with Bernadette or the means he employs.

Gracie's usefulness in providing the novel with a structural thread is as important as the picture she gives of Indian life and character from the inside. However, she is only intermittently conscious of telling a story, and in her opening lines almost effaces herself:

I'm just barely sixteen years old, but sometimes I feel a whole lot older than that.

You know how sometimes a person can get to feelin' like their life's already just about over with? Or worse yet, like they ain't even here anymore?

Well, that's how I feel a lot of the time...at least ever since Bernadette died. (2)

Then, after telling how she and her father were notified of Bernadette's death, she presents fragmentary memories about her sister's beauty and prowess as a dancer and Anderson's triumph at the Taos powwow, the highest point of his beauty and power. Later—perhaps to indicate that the shock has worn off—Querry has her describe settings, customs, and characters, seemingly by association but in fact providing expository material essential for understanding what is to follow.

The middle of the novel, in which Gracie describes a trip to the Navajo and Hopi country with Bernadette and the George brothers, is more coherent. On the surface, the trip is the high point of Gracie's life, her farthest excursion into the world outside Dulce. In fact, intercut with the italicized passages introduced at this point, the trip marks the beginning of Anderson's decline, either because of Emmett's witchcraft or because of the alcohol which Emmett gives him.

After the trip and Tom's death, Gracie chronicles Anderson's decline and her sister's growing sadness and continued silence about her problems. The one moment of relief comes in Gracie's account of Bernadette's last powwow, where her beauty of body and spirit are emphasized most strongly. This sequence is clearly intended to echo

the one in which Anderson triumphs; Bernadette recalls it and vainly hopes, by making Anderson remember, to get him to stop drinking.

In the brief final episode, Gracie tells of the circumstances of Anderson's suicide and her plans to move to California before delivering her valedictory lines, an echo of the novel's opening:

I feel like my whole life is just about over with. Like it's already gone past me.

And I'm just barely sixteen. (214)

Gracie's beginning and closing speeches, enclosing as they do the two powwows featuring the doomed lovers, indicate that she not only establishes a framework but, like Charlie Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* and any number of Jamesian observers, occupies a central place within it. She is the most fully developed character, hers the major narrative voice, hers the clearest awareness of her circumstances and the means by which she must confront them.

However, Gracie's is not the only voice, nor hers the only tragedy. Tom, Anderson, Bernadette, and presumably Emmett have suffered the consequences of what the next-to-last epigraph, placed just before the catastrophe, calls the "imbalance" created "by indulging in excesses, having improper contact with dangerous powers," behavior that results in "conflict, disharmony, disorder, evil, sickness of the body and mind, ugliness, misfortune and/or disaster..." (165). Starr has suffered the loss of her friend and gained a limited awareness, but her knowledge will apparently not cause her to change her life for the better. The other narrative voices and the audience, presumably white, may contemplate but cannot alter or be directly touched by tragic events that occur not because of the white world's incursion or even Navajo witchcraft but of human flaws and passions that are more Indian in texture than in essence.[3]

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[3] I am indebted to the students in my critical reading and writing course who read and discussed the book with me and to Professors Geary Hobson, Alan Velie, and Jeanette Harris, who read an early draft of this essay.

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